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ABSTRACT

The children of Appalachia, a region characterized by a strong oral tradition, are constantly defining their roles in their society through language. In so doing they are contributing to the maintenance of the patterns of life in that society. Children observe the functional uses of story at a very early age, and narratives emphasize group affiliation. When personal narratives are excluded in educational settings, the implication is that the students do not comprise a group. Teachers who tell stories but do not allow the pupils to tell them, or who exclude narratives altogether, may be weakening their effectiveness or attempting to teach new subject matter in an unfamiliar mode of learning. Since Appalachian children have a well-developed sense of story, their teachers should incorporate activities that allow this strength to shine. The class might collaborate on tape recording a story or play, or follow the Foxfire concept of recording the oral traditions and histories of their communities. The ballads of Appalachia may also be studied from a literary point of view because they are well-developed accounts that demonstrate the human condition as well as individual strengths. The learning of literacy can only be accomplished in contexts as meaningful and as joyful as those which nurtured an individual's oral language acquisition. (HTH)

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The Application of Culturally Relevant Factors to Literacy Programs in Appalachia

Paper presented at the

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The Application of Culturally Relevant Factors to Literacy Programs in Appalachia

West Virginia is the only state that lies completely in the American region termed "Appalachia". This area is characterized by a strong oral tradition. Ballads, ghostlore, minelore, herblore, riddles, and proverbs abound. It is not uncommon to have family members and neighbors visit for an entire day, filling the time talking. While the imposition of the mainstream technological society may be weakening the opportunities for the practice of such lore or the desire of the young people to learn the lore, the subculture continues to support a basically oral tradition.

The historical role of literacy in the region is defined in this scene from The Dollmaker (Arnow, 1954, p. 33).

> GERTIE held the Bible open at Ecclesiates. She stood with her back to the open front door, and faced the five children. Amos, still a shade pale and thin from his sickness of three weeks back, sat on a sheepskin rug near the heating stove. The four older ones, neat and quiet in their Sunday clothes, sat in a row between the two beds that stood, one in each back corner of the big low-ceilinged, small-windowed room. Her reading seemed a talking, for she looked more often at the children than at the Bible page, saying the words sometimes when her eyes went past the children to the rows of October-colored hills that lay behind the back window.

Here reading is a skill which exists solely as a means of moral instruction for the young. The particular skill required is the ability to read aloud. Listeners base their evaluations and remembrances of personalities on a reader's manner of delivery. Moreover, the content of The Bible, which includes stories from another even older oral tradition, is in harmony with the requirements of a present-day oral tradition. Any uses for reading other than religious training may still be considered unnecessary or even dangerous (Stewart, 1971).

This restricted role for reading in the lives of the children interferes with the successful acquisition of literacy because it leads to widespread anti-intellectual attitudes. Teachers recount parent conferences in which those parents who come have emphatically told the teachers, "We don't want our children to be brains" (McClure, 1981; Massey, 1981; Spurlock, 1981). Education is not seen as a path to success in Appalachia. To be successful by an Appalachian yardstick is to be a good person, particularly in the eyes of your family and church. Even in graduate school, students may be missing because a sister had a baby or a brother-in-law is in town. Some parents may verbally support the educational system yet permit skipping school or dropping out. As researchers have noted, children are far more influenced by the home than the school (Jencks, 1972). For example, children may be absent from school for an entire hunting season and teachers are expected to anticipate and adjust to their absences (Winfree, 1981). The impact of the hunting experience is apparent in children's oral language. Several of my teachers have asked their primary pupils the seasons of the year and even after instruction, the pupils respond with the names of the official hunting seasons (Winfree, 1981; McClure, 1981; Marks, 1981).

Educators must deal with cultural diversity. However, their attitudes are the result of personal experiences. In West Virginia most teachers are natives of West Virginia and they are female. As professionals, they may have espoused the middle class values of the educational system, thereby rejecting any examples of regional characteristics they come across. This teacher typically regards her charges as deprived and constantly corrects

their behavior and their language. Failing to recognize the bias of intelligence tests, she uses the children's low scores to support her assumption that they have low intellectual ability. Her attitudes are consciously or unconsciously communicated to the children, and their negative self-concept helps them conform to the teacher's expectations. At the other extreme, a different teacher may have passed through the system herself all the while resenting the imposition of a so-called standard, middle-class culture on her feelings for her native region. This teacher is accepting of "things regional", but her bitterness also encourages a negative self-concept in the children and interferes with her helping them prepare for the wider world.

The polarity that most adults demonstrate fosters a kind of cultural schizophrenia in the children. Literally caught between two cultures, the children make choices in order to survive. In 1980, the state's average dropout rate, computed by comparing the number of students in grades 7-12 who leave school to those who graduate, was 25.71 per cent (Ward, 1980). While this figure may be lower than previous years, certain counties continue to experience a dropout rate as high as 50 per cent. Apparently the children, even when faced with a minimally supportive environment outside of the educational system, will choose to identify with family and neighborhood.

In the dilemma facing the youth of this region, the teacher as a representative of the system through which the children must pass, is <u>the</u> pivotal figure. Her attitudes toward the culture, family, and language of her pupils can make or break educational careers. Children come to school speaking the only language they know. They have learned to talk in culturally determined

contexts. They use different idioms, vocabulary, or manner of speaking in church, in school, or at play. They have learned to edit or expand their talk according to the age group with whom they are dealing. With peers, elders, authority figures, and younger children, they play different roles. They have learned when to speak and when not to, how to be tactful, and what is sarcastic. They have learned what language is by observing what language does (Halliday, 1975). They are constantly defining their roles in their society through language and in so doing they are contributing to the maintenance of the patterns of life in that society. Therefore, to reject the way any child talks is to find the child's family and culture also unacceptable. It is irrational to expect any child to participate in such a conspiracy. Teachers must comprehend the relativity of language, that is, that language cannot be judged by notions of good and bad, for language varies with the communities that give rise to the system. We all belong to communities and we all speak dialects. A dialect is a variety of a particular language. It is influenced by

> ...age, education, social class, regional and ethnic background, but all those who speak the same dialect can communicate the subtlest shadings of meaning to one another...all dialects are adequate means of communication in their cultural environments (Hess, 1974, p. 281).

Once language relativity is understood, teachers can accept the oral language abilities with which children come to school, and once teachers accept the children's dialect, they become more accepting of the children themselves.

Yet teachers must also prepare their pupils to handle the wider world. Ideally such ability is accomplished through a bicultural/bidialectal program which allows children to maintain the oral language needed to communicate in

their neighborhoods and families while offering an alternative dialect for contexts in school, at work, or with travel out-of-state. To help children achieve a set of alternative dialects, teachers first need to distinguish the specific characteristics of their pupils' dialect. In fact, it is justifiable to talk of dialects in the region rather than dialect. Children in Appalachia do not all talk like each other. The topography has such an influence that children from one hollow will not always understand the children from two hollows over. Even teachers who come from Appalachia need to meet unfamiliar dialects with an open mind and active listening, and they need to encourage the children to do the same. We all use our language to convey meaning, and the components of meaning may be identified at phonetic, phonological, syntactic, lexical, and semantic levels (Firth, 1957).

Initially what makes an unfamiliar dialect most difficult to understand is the unexpected prosodics (stress, pitch, and intonation) and voice quality. After a short time, speakers of different dialects usually tune in to the same frequency. Then within these broad musical patterns, in searching for comprehensible units, they may most obviously encounter unfamiliar significant units of speech called phonemes.

In talking to teachers about the particular sound characteristics which they have found most remarkable in their children, two categories emerge: those that barely interfere with communication provided we meet dialect differences with an open mind; and those that provide real obstacles to communication. By "barely interfering" I would cite: 1) final /iy/ for /a/ so that Berthy, Irmy, sody, and opry can be guessed as Bertha, Irma, soda, and opera (as in Gran' Ol' Opry) and final /a/ for /iy/ as in Naoma for Naomi;

2) final endings of verbals, e.g. huntin', goin' for hunting and going;
3) personal pronouns such as hisself, theirself for himself and themselves. However, interior vowels present more of a problem. Primary level teachers, particularly those required to use phonics programs, constantly complain about pin and pill for pen and peel, set for sit and tar, far, and bar for tire, fire, and bear. Changing a final /o/ to -er keeps fellow and feller, hollow and holler comprehensible, but when the prefix is also dropped, comprehension becomes more difficult, e.g. baccer or bacca is tobacco, tater or tāta is potato, mater or māda is tomato.

Verb systems across dialects also present interesting examples in the syntax. Users of what has been termed "mountain speech" (Stewart, 1971) employ the same form for the simple past and for the past participle, resulting in such constructions as The medicine had took, He had wrote hit down, and I get throwed hin. More unique is the use of a combination of conditionals might(a) could-a for might have could have carrying the idea of maybe, as in "You might could a fix the chairs different" (Marks, 1980). Also, there is no distinction between the singular was and plural were. I, he, she and also we, you, and they take was, usually pronounced uz and therefore frequently confused with cuz (because).

With active listening, we can try to comprehend intonation patterns and phonology. Syntactic equivalents may also be fairly easily matched. But vocabulary depends on experience. The lexicon of a particular dialect is best learned by living the life. If we have not encountered certain terms, we literally face a stone wall when we first do hear them. If we have traveled at all in the United States, our experiences might help us with the Appalachian's

use of pop for soda, skillet for frying pan, and tennis shoes for sneakers, or we may use such terms ourselves in our dialects. We may have seen Westerns which could help us recognize the Appalachian use of, "That's right purdy," "I'm plum tired," or "I clean forgit." Can you explain the distinction between maw and paw and mawmaw and pawpaw? You might be in a social situation one day where the difference between mother and father and grandmother and grandfather is crucial. Can you guess at poke (paperbag), blinked, blinky (soured), smearcase (cottage cheese), press (closet), board (table), or molly mooch (mushroom)? Lexicon is so unique and specific that the terms molly mooch, molly moochers, miracles, morels, and puckers are all mushrooms, and these terms are not even interchangeable in the dialects of southern West Virginia.

Idioms are likewise heavily dependent on personal experience. We may comprehend the expression, "Slick as a mole's tail" because we have seen a mole or a picture of a mole. What does, "He's a pins and needles kinda person" mean? This construction may convey the idea that the fellow is nervous or irritable. Instead, to be a "pins and needles person" is to be "down to earth". Besides expressions that result in confusion, we have expressions whose use across dialects may result in hurt feelings. One of my non-native teachers who happened to be pregnant asked a native-born teacher is she could help her carry some boxes to her car. When the West Virginia teacher replied, "I don't care," the non-native teacher got red in the face and left to find someone else to help her. The West Virginia teacher kept hanging around wondering exactly when she was supposed to help with the boxes (Rubrecht, 1980). There is also the story of the student who went out-of-state

to college. The members of his dormitory were dividing into groups for dinner and some fellows from his floor asked him if he wanted to join them. He responded, "I don't care." They left without him and he was angry for days because they did not wait for him or tell him where they were going. The members of the dorm immediately categorized him as standoffish and rude. In both examples, the non-natives responded according to their understanding of "I don't care" as "I am really indifferent to the whole idea," when the West Virginian meant, "I don't care" as "I don't mind if I do." Utterances occur in culturally determined contexts and we interpret the utterances according to the meaning ascribed by the group to which we belong. Communication can only successfully take place when we understand the speaker's understanding of the function of his or her utterance.

One universal function of language is the telling of stories. It has been said that "Humanity was born telling stories" (Cazden and Hymes, 1978). We gossip, joke, and refer to common experiences. In daily life we ask each other, "How was your day?" "What did you do after that?" or "How did you get started in newspaper work, weaving, etc.?" and bring on the recounting of life events. A sense of story is crucial to human development because

> We resort to story to make an entity of experience; to give our experience form and balance; to make generalizations about the world. We structure and often modify experience when creating stories of our everyday life, and also, often modify our own internal representations of experience when listening to the stories of others (Brown, 1975, p. 357).

Children observe such functional uses of story, and when these observations are accompanied by the more structured storytelling of a rich oral tradition

or the parental reading of storybooks, we observe a story schema in the oral language of children as young as 2½ years of age.

Furthermore, narratives emphasize group affiliation. When personal narratives are excluded in educational settings, which is typically the case, the implication is that the students do not comprise a group. And if the teacher allows herself but not her pupils to tell stories, she may be setting up invisible barriers which weaken her effectiveness as a teacher (Cazden and Hymes, 1978). Moreover, a classroom that excludes narratives may be attempting to teach new subject matter in an unfamiliar mode of learning, since the children's family and community frequently teach through storytelling. Giving the children the opportunity to take turns as storytellers in the classroom allows them to use a learning strength which they have as a functioning member of the community and the experience brings the outside context into the classroom (Cazden and Hymes, 1978).

In the lives of young Appalachians, storytelling demonstrates not only entertaining and instructive functions, but fieldwork indicates that the storytelling model in the community transfers to literacy as well. Two communities in the Carolina Piedmont, Roadville and Trackton, are presently being looked at for the types of oral tradition they support (Heath, 1981). Roadville stories are true tales that reaffirm commitment to community and to church values through personal experiences and testimonials. In contrast, Trackton stories use fact only in the universals of human strength and they include play songs, ritual insults, and cheers. When the children from both communities were allowed to write stories in school, the teachers noted that

the Roadville children wrote personal experience stories and the Trackton children wrote tales. The results strongly suggest that educators need to attend to the kind and degree of sociocultural integration any pupil brings to the academic setting, how this integration molds the pupil's linguistic models, and how these linguistic models may be incorporated into educational programs.

The teacher's use of an appropriate learning mode from the larger society in her classroom can guarantee a place for literacy in the lives of her pupils and by extension in the lives of the adults and the society she serves. Appalachian children have a well-developed sense of story and the teacher of Appalachian children should take advantage of this strength by incorporating activities which allow this strength to shine. Since the sense of story serves as an organizer for the meaning found in life experiences, let us return to the example of the children who recount the hunting seasons for the broader seasons of the year. The teacher, rather than voicing her frustration at attempting to push her pupils into a middle class mold, can take advantage of their knowledge by reading hunting stories to the class and encouraging a group language experience story on the chalkboard about a hunting expedition. The class might then divide into small groups or pairs to compose a collaborative story or play that they tape record or write and then share with the rest of the class. The tapes may be incorporated into listening centers and the stories can become books which the teacher or students transcribe and the children illustrate. Name plates at the front tell the authors and a paper glued at the back may provide a space for the

names of those who read the book and their opinions. Teachers then have a classroom library of books the children have created about the lifestyle that matters to them. (In my classes I have the teachers make books. Their pupils usually see them and want to make books too. Long after the teachers have finished their books and whenever the pupils have time, book-making in the classroom continues. In the 16-county area where I teach, book-making has been enormously successful.) If we view reading as the process of getting meaning from print and writing as the process of putting meaning into print, then we can never be satisfied with just decoding. A New Yorker and a West Virginian can both successfully decode the sentence, "In the spring we gather greens," but the impact of the sentence is significantly different for both readers. For the West Virginian the statement represents a slice of life that is part of a worldview, while for the New Yorker, the sentence is empty. When learners really understand that print functions because it is meaningful, they will value their ability to handle print. And when learners value print, they will not only easily begin reading, but they will keep at it.

Another opportunity which capitalizes on the lifestyle of the community follows the Foxfire concept. Training students in such ethnographic techniques as interviewing and participant observation enables them to record the oral traditions and oral histories of the people in their community. Speaking, listening, reading, and writing are well-integrated in such a project. While some of the stories collected may be unfamiliar to the students, the names and places are usually known to them. For example, in a ballad about a feud in Lincoln County called "Lincoln County Crew", many young people asked about the song had never heard it, but they could all tell where to find

any creek, store, or hollow mentioned in the song. Students learn to care about reading and writing the materials they collect in such a field project. Moreover, recording the traditions and crafts which may be fading in the community provides students with an obvious sense of origin and place in the world. Such awareness has the potential to ease much of the cultural ambivalence they face as Appalachians.

Literature helps each of us internalize the world while externalizing our feelings. We deal with human questions which are dramatized, and develop deeper insight into human nature and human values. The ballads of Appalachia may also be studied from a literary point of view because they are well-developed accounts which demonstrate not only the human condition but also individual strengths. For example,

The Lightning Express

The lightning express from the depot so grand had just started on its way,
And most of the passengers who were on board all seemed to be happy and gay,
Except a young man on a seat by himself was reading a letter he had.

It was plain to be seen by the tears in his eyes that the contents of it made him sad.
The stern ol' conductor then started around collecting a fare from all there.
And finally reaching the side of the boy he gruffly demanded his fare.

"I have not a ticket," the boy then replied, "I'll pay you back someday."

"I'll put you off next station", he cried, but stopped when he heard the boy say,
"Please, mister conductor, don't put me off your train.

For the best friend I have in this world, sir, is waiting for me in pain.

Expected to die any moment, she may not last through the day,

I want to bid mama good-by, sir, before God calls her away.

Mama was ailing before I left home and needed a doctor's care.

I came to the city employment to seek but couldn't find work any work there.

Then yesterday a letter from sister arrived, 'Mother's dying, come home,' it did say.

And that's why I'm anxious to ride, sir, though I haven't the money to pay."

A little girl sat on next seat and exclaimed, "To put the boy off is a shame."
And taking a hat a collection she made which soon paid his fare on the train.
"I thank you, dear miss, foryour kindness to me."
"You are welcome," said she, "Never fear."
Each time the conductor would go through the car these words would ring in his ear.
Please, mister conductor, don't put me off of your train.

For the best friend I have in this world, sir, is waiting for me in pain.

Expected to die any moment, she may not last through the day.

I want to bid mama good-by, sir, before God calls her away." [1]

Listening to or reading such a story can prompt discussions about what it is like not to have money when you really need it, the illness or death of a parent, the humanity at least occasionally found in the world, or even Appalachian migrations to cities to find work. The writing of compositions, poetry, or ballads can easily follow.

Other ballads quickly spark controversy. For example, this song presents a strong case against women.

I've Got No Use for the Women

I've got no use for the women,
A true one may seldom be found
They'll use a man for his money
When it's gone, they'll all turn' im down.
They're all alike at the bottom.
Selfish and grasping for all.
They'll stand by your side while you're winning,
And laugh in your face at your fall...[2]

1,2 Both ballads were collected from Mrs. Naomi Sitton a resident of Boone County, West Virginia, by Dr. Hafiz Baghban.

Some girls in class might easily make a similar case against men and develop aspects of the discussion into written expression in various genres.

Teachers of Appalachian children might well be advised to focus their attention on facilitating their pupils' ability to handle written language. Dialect speakers can acquire control over written language though they may never acquire a so-called standard oral language (Goodman, 1973). Miscue research indicates that readers make miscues which move toward their own oral language and that when the classroom teacher accepts the reader's oral language such miscues do not interfere with comprehension. Among my students I have teachers that I would consider strong regional speakers. Many of these teachers passed through college constantly referred to speech therapy classes. They are presently in graduate school with their dialects intact but they are able to write college exams and term papers in standard English. This dichotomy may also be observed in developing countries whose citizens speak a variety of dialects yet become literate. Therefore a bidialectal program which emphasizes oral (D_1) - oral (D_2) competence may not be as successful as a bidialectal program which accepts oral (D_1) - written (D_2) competence.

In summary, Appalachia is an American region whose communities need to give literacy both a life and a significant role. The educational system has the responsibility of seeing that this realization takes place by demonstrating the functionality of reading and writing in Appalachian life. Teachers can accomplish this task by capitalizing on the strengths with which learners come to school. A strength we all have but particularly well-practiced and valued in the peoples with strong oral traditions is the telling of stories.

With a little imagination, the use of stories from daily life and the more formalized ballads and tales can provide meaningful encounters with written language. In addition, teachers need to emphasize classroom models of language which are compatible with community models of language. Storytelling, reading The Bible aloud and singing ballads are social events. Reading as a silent, private act is not compatible with the values the Appalachian community treasures. For learner strengths to flourish, teachers must provide an integrated, student-centered language arts program which not only uses the students' oral abilities in activities such as book-making and language experience, but also which uses such sociable techniques as discussion, working in pairs, small group projects, and constant sharing of experiences and projects.

By avoiding a consideration of regional strengths and gearing the educational system toward a middle-class norm, we have cut any harmony that could exist between home learning and school learning. In so doing, we have added to the frustrations of those students who must pass through the system and those teachers who feel they must perpetuate the system. (Pity the poor teacher who feels obligated to force the so-called real seasons of the year on the pupil who wonders why children have to go to school at all.) We have conveyed negative attitudes toward language variety and ended uncounted educational careers. We have produced reading materials with exercises devoid of local color and often meaningless even in terms of the broadest human values. In our concern over test scores, we have taught to the test and lost sight of our real goal in teaching. Our real purpose is, as it has always been, to

help our students learn to read and to write. The learning of literacy can only be accomplished in contexts as meaningful and as joyful as those which nurtured our learning to talk. If our students are able to read and write, and to enjoy reading and writing, then we, as educators, and, in particular, reading educators, have truly served our society.

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